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HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
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CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138

March 25, 1974

Dr. J.B. Neillands  
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Berkeley, California 94720

Dear Dr. Neillands:

I agree with you that it remains important to insist that tear gas and herbicides are covered by the Geneva Convention. The reason, to my mind, is partly political. The vote in the U.N. Assembly on this point was 80 to 3; and only Australia and Portugal joined the U.S. in upholding our view that these substances were not covered. A number of the countries that abstained from voting (e.g. France) did so only because they believed that this was not a proper matter for the assembly to vote on; their views were those of the majority. If the U.S. adopts the Geneva Convention, but only with these reservations, it will seriously undermine the significance of our adherence to the Convention, in the eyes of other nations.

As regards herbicides in particular, I think the evidence of the great ecological damage they have done, and the suggestive evidence of direct and serious injury to people, is in any case a compelling reason for banning their use in war. I have not yet received a copy of the National Academy Committee's report (it is on order) but the discussion of it in recent issues of Science and Nature makes plain that great ecological damage has been done. A number of expert critics including Meselson, believe that the damage to the forests is much greater than the Academy Committee's report indicates - indeed some of the experts on the Academy's own panel dissented strongly on this. The evidence of damage to people (the Montagnards particularly) is highly suggestive, and might be extremely serious. It is obviously not conclusive, but it clearly calls for a lot more study. I personally would be unyielding in demanding that the Geneva Convention includes a ban on herbicides in war.

The case against tear gas in war is probably less powerful; but tear gas in war is a lethal weapon. It is used to drive people out of underground shelters, so they can then be shot or bombed. I grant that it is a far less horrible weapon than napalm; but the answer to that, I think, is to work for a

ban on napalm, not for giving up the ban on tear gas. The political considerations, mentioned in my first paragraph, are I think compelling here.

I agree, of course, that the problem of binary weapons is very serious, and needs to be vigorously pursued.

Yours sincerely,

John T. Edsall

P.S. I am sending copies of this letter to Joshua Lederberg and Matthew Meselson. You are welcome to show it to others, as you see fit.